

Cumberland Plateau Fiber Optic Backbone Lighting Event (May 3, 2005)

Lebanon, Virginia

I am pleased to return to the Town of Lebanon this morning to participate in a truly worthy celebration. Today, we celebrate the lighting of the Cumberland Plateau fiber optic backbone, a project which will enable the provision of broadband services, including affordable high-speed Internet access, to businesses and households in Russell and Tazewell Counties.

Approximately ten years ago, I encouraged local governments throughout the Ninth District to find a means of deploying broadband networks so that affordable high-speed Internet access would be available to businesses and residents throughout our region. My goal in making this recommendation was to set our region apart in comparison to other rural areas of the nation, to make us more attractive than the typical rural region to industries looking to expand their operations into new locations, and to create technology-based jobs for Southwest Virginians.

Today, I am pleased to note that many of the communities in our region are making great strides in the deployment of broadband networks, and the success which we celebrate today in Russell and Tazewell Counties is a shining example of the outstanding work that is being done in many of our localities.

Using \$1.6 million in federal funds which I worked to obtain from the U.S. Department of Commerce's Economic Development Administration and a \$710,660 grant from the Virginia Tobacco Commission, the Bristol Virginia Utilities Board (BVU) has installed high bandwidth fiber from the Town of Abingdon along Route 19 into Russell County to the Cumberland Plateau Regional Industrial Park here in Lebanon.

A point of presence has been established at the industrial park to house all of the electronic equipment necessary to make use of the fiber for Internet and other telecommunications services. From the industrial park in Lebanon, fiber has been installed on AEP power poles along Route 19 from Lebanon to Claypool Hill and along Route 460 through Cedar Bluff to the Richlands Small Business Incubator.

In total, through this project, fiber optic lines have been deployed over a distance of 51 miles. I am currently working to obtain federal funding to extend the backbone to the towns of Tazewell and Bluefield along Routes 19 and 460

East and to Grundy along Route 460 West, with the goal of bringing the fiber optic backbone service to the heart of Tazewell and Buchanan Counties. I am also asking for the federal funds needed to expand the fiber backbone services in Scott, Lee and Wise Counties and hope to announce success in obtaining the funds for each of these projects later this year.

BVU is currently working to connect governmental offices and local businesses to the fiber optic backbone over the

distance that we refer to as the "last mile", linking the backbone to the premises of the end users.. Through a second \$700,000 grant from the Tobacco Commission, businesses which are located within 1,000 feet of the route of the backbone are now eligible to be connected. 17 businesses and a number of government offices in Russell County have already been connected to the backbone. BVU plans to begin establishing connections for businesses in the Claypool Hill, Cedar Bluff and Richlands portions of Tazewell County in the coming weeks. Southwest Virginia Community College will soon be connected as well.

With a connection to the backbone, businesses will have access to high-speed Internet service which was previously unavailable in many areas and digital cable television service offered by BVU. Internet based telephone service is also expected to be available in the near future. Over the longer term, more businesses and homes will be linked to the fiber backbone .

BVU Optinet will be operating and maintaining the telecommunications network. Interested businesses may contact the company's customer service line at 1-877-835-1272 to learn how to obtain broadband services.

The establishment of advanced telecommunications services in Russell and Tazewell Counties and the creation in some locations of redundant broadband capabilities represents an outstanding success in our efforts to attract highly paid, technology-based jobs to Southwest Virginia. Some technology companies need not one but two fiber backbone paths to the Internet in order to have a backup service if the line they primarily rely on goes out . As I meet with the corporate executives of technology companies and firms interested in expanding their operations into new locations, I can now point to communities in Russell and Tazewell Counties as localities with established telecommunications infrastructures ready to meet all of their business needs.

Just as first canals, then railroads and then highways were the major arteries of commerce in earlier eras, in the 21st Century, access to broadband will be a defining feature of economic success for rural communities. Step by positive step our expanding fiber optic infrastructure is assuring that Southwest Virginia's communities will be at the center of economic opportunity .

I would like to take the opportunity of these remarks to recognize several individuals who have been instrumental in the success which we celebrate today.

I want to commend Danny Brown, Chairman of the Russell County Board of Supervisors; Earl Griffith, Chairman of the Tazewell County Board of Supervisors; and other Members of their Boards; for their leadership and foresight in bringing this highly capable infrastructure to Russell and Tazewell Counties.

Jim Gillespie, Russell County Administrator; Harry Rutherford, Chairman of the Russell County Industrial Development Authority and Members of his Board; Tony Doty, Mayor of the Town of Lebanon; Ken Wysor, Mayor of the Town of Richlands; and Members of the Lebanon and Richlands Town Councils; are also to be recognized for their commitment to and effective work in support of this project.

Neal Noyse, Virginia State Director for the programs of the U. S. Economic Development Administration is to be

commended for his able assistance in processing the application for these funds and for his continued efforts on behalf of the many communities of the Ninth District. I look forward to having the opportunity of thanking Neal once again when we obtain approval for federal funding to extend the fiber optic backbone to Tazewell, Bluefield and Grundy and into Scott, Lee and Wise Counties later this year.

I also want to thank Andy Chafin, Executive Director of the Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission and Wes Rosenbalm, General Manager of the Bristol Virginia Utilities Board , for their efforts in designing the project and for working cooperatively to make it a reality.

State Senator Phillip Puckett and other Members of the Tobacco Commission are also to be thanked for their significant financial contributions to not only the deployment of the fiber optic backbone, but also to connecting businesses and government offices to the backbone over the last mile.

Finally, I want to thank my District Director, Laura Lee, for her persistent and persuasive work in aid of this project.

The fiber optic backbone which we officially light today marks another major step forward in our work to improve the quality of life for Southwest Virginia residents. I want to commend all here for the success of this project and offer a special congratulations to the residents of Russell and Tazewell Counties who will benefit tremendously from the new broadband telecommunications services that are now available to them.